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ABSTRACT

Despite widespread calls for moves toward a student-centered instruction and activity, educators have produced few structural models for teaching that empowers learners. Several teaching approaches have been offered that are said to offer socially generative, student-centered learning. Among these is oral history. Because oral history often seeks to include the voices of groups that do not leave documentary records, its subjects can be seen as disenfranchised. Oral history becomes an empowering context for such groups. When oral history work is used as a learning context, the issues of students as researchers and teachers as co-researchers and project directors came into play. The products of oral history are subject to multiple interpretations. Because the interviewer affects the content of an oral history, the issues involved in conducting research should be included as part of the curriculum in an oral history course. Interviewers must realize that the remembering of oral histories is imperfect and that the researcher's own biases operate heavily. Oral history can empower students, but it can also be a teacher-controlled unit plan. One is critical pedagogy, the other is not. Teachers and researchers must keep such issues in mind when reflecting upon oral history. (Twenty-five references are attached.) (SG)

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Oral History as a Critical Pedagogy: Some Cautionary Issues

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Oral History 2

Much current writing in curriculum and curriculum theory suggests moving instruction and activity to a student-centered focus. Echoing from loudspeakers at our professional meetings are calls for authentic instruction, empowered learners, and insider views. These are issues that appear in print with regularity, as well. Yet, with this mandate and even with the consent of the audiences, we have produced little in the way of structural models for teaching that empowers learners. Perhaps the difficulty is that it may be counterintuitive to provide structure for a deconstructive process.

Recently, Anderson (1989) has suggested an approach for research/teaching that may prove helpful in our search for contexts that respect all participants in the processes of learning and in learning about learning. Under the grouping critical ethnography, Anderson proposes research that is inherently and purposefully driven by ideology in its critical appraisal of educational practice. In addition, Anderson suggests several teaching approaches that, in his opinion, constitute socially generative, student-centered learning. Among these approaches is oral history. Unlike Anderson, we are not so quick to support this selection without some qualifications. This paper is about the issues embedded in the use of oral history, both as praxis that is intended to empower students to learning, and as grounding for qualitative research initiatives.

Situating Oral History

Because oral history often seeks to include the voices of groups that often do not leave documentary records, its subjects can be seen as disenfranchised. Oral history, then, becomes an empowering context for groups such as ethnic minorities, geographically isolated enclaves,

religious groups, and women. And since remembering involves some chronological distancing from the remembered, oral histories often involve older informants. In addition to representing marginalized groups, oral history as a teaching approach can also be used to move the locus of curriculum control in the direction of students' initiatives. In this way, oral history can be used as a pedagogy that empowers students. From an educational perspective, oral history involves students in active, rather than passive, approaches pursued, in part, outside the classroom (Sitton, Mahaffey, & Davis, 1983). Oral history as curriculum uses the recollections of living people about the past to teach students, and uses students to collect and interpret those recollections.

In view of the foregoing issues, it is reasonable to conclude that oral history is essentially democratic and radical. However, the relationship is not axiomatic. According to Lummis (1988), a radicalized interpretation of oral history may be more mythology than fact. "...the method [oral history] is at best neutral, and used carelessly, overwhelmingly conservative" (p. 20). Lummis goes on to say that informants characteristically remember "the good things" and tend to narrativize in the direction of equality, harmony, and happiness. Lummis cautions: "Because oral history accounts relate the pleasures and satisfactions of life along side the meagre conditions, there is real danger in perpetuating the 'poor but happy' image of life which is, paradoxically, used to justify the comfortable in their more ample possessions" (p. 20). It is upon Lummis' paradox that the radical/conservative debate rests. Further, the dilemma proposed by Lummis presents the ethical issues only to the extent of their effects upon the informants and the representativeness of the resulting products. In classrooms, additional ethical concerns emerge.

When the act of "doing" oral history is used as a learning context, then the issues between students as researchers and teachers as co-researchers, as well as project directors, come into play. Of course, oral history can be either transformative or conservative, depending upon the ethos of the framing project, and more importantly, the politics of the projects' director (teacher). After all, the making of oral history is a subjective experience, and the interpretation of subjectivity, when it is done within power hierarchies, has long been a central issue in writings about history writing (Cohen, 1986; White, 1980; 1978). It is no different in the use of oral history in classroom discourses. Teachers' beliefs can be used, either consciously or unconsciously, to select desirable interpretations and to censure undesirable ones. These interpretive dramas have been scripted in the fields of historical narratives and, more immediately, in the realm of oral history. First, oral history, then history writing, generally.

Oral History and Interpretation

According to McMahan (1989), the products of oral history (tapes, written transcriptions, narrative accounts) are subject to multiple interpretations. This interpretive diversity is not unlike the subjectivity in textual interpretation proposed by Bleich (1978), Iser (1980), and Rosenblatt (1978). However, McMahan goes on to include that the social interaction that grounds the texts of oral histories is also born of the intersubjectivity of the interview experience. That is, the communicative performances of the interviewer and the interviewee jointly affect the production of the audio, video and textual records of the event. Both participants bring their life experiences and associated biases to the interview. Both sets of beliefs are joined in "the interview." The

position of the interviewer is to interpret what the subject relates, hopefully from an emic perspective. But, of course, emic stance is always an imperfect match. In addition to telling the stories, the subject's position includes evaluation and other reactions to the interviewer's online interpretations, lending them value through verification. The interview, as a social event, is a manifestation of the participants' communicative performances.

In classrooms, where oral histories may be used as a learning approach, McMahan's socio-communicative views on oral history can be used to problematize (Lather, 1991) the very issues that prompt McMahan's caution. By problematizing, we take Lather to mean that the issues that are involved in conducting a research (in this case oral history) are included as part of the curriculum of the course. Resolutions for the problems and the issues inherent in collecting, interpreting, and writing become part of the curriculum for the students. So they simultaneously learn method and solve problems inherent in a subjective, or hermeneutic, exercise. And presumably, owning problems and solving them leads to ownership of the process, and more likely, to voice and empowerment.

In choosing subjects, persons conducting the oral history interviews can choose to interview "elite" or "non-elite" subjects. Elite oral histories concern those, according to McMahan (1989), "...persons who develop lore that justifies their attempts to control society. The non-elites are those persons who create a lore to explain their lack of control" (p. xi✓). While we suspect that the choice of informants is more complex than a dichotomy, Wilke cautions that we must at least attend to who and how we decide which end of the spectrum is appropriate? This is an example of **how** you believe about oral history and **what** you know about it

influence what you do with it.

A related issue that can become part of class processing has to do with the interviewers' roles during the interview. Since the interview is a subjective, constructive act, the role of the interviewer can't help but influence the kinds of and the amounts of information that are collected. McMahan (1989) suggests that the task of the oral historian is to develop and maintain cooperation and coherence between the participants. The task of achieving these goals is much different for the interviewers who are non-engaged than it is for those who challenge and who interact with their subjects.

As teachers and researchers, both using oral history, we ask "How does interaction/noninteraction influence the oral histories?" If the meaning constructed and collected during the interview is a transaction, then the roles the participants play during the making of meaning influence what is made. In the first case, a non-engaged, no reaction interview would seem to provide the most accurate objective data that could be pulled from an interviewee. Of course, the same data could be criticized as unreliable and atypical since it was not subjected to verification or discussion. Whereas, an interactive, even challenging interviewer could be seen as one who influences, creates, or even worse, one who distorts the subjects' representations of their own lived experiences. Conversely, the same data could be seen as validated by social interaction. These are issues to be discussed and resolved either as an individual conducting an oral history, or as a social group of researchers. Obviously, there is not a "best approach" solution out of this conundrum. "The best" is whatever a group decides fits a given situation. It becomes especially important for a collection of data by different field workers who will later want

comparable data. Such a constructed solution as a learning exercise seems to us what Lather calls problematizing.

Representation in History Writing

As troubling as multiple interpretations seem to be for any kind of objective reality in oral histories, it is not a problem exclusive to the field. More generally, one can question the issue of objectivity in any remembered experience. Of course, philosophically, a remembered experience can never be true in any objective way. It is always a constructed narrative on the part of the rememberer. According to Sarbin (1986) and Goffman (1974), we use narrative frames as organization for disconnected experience. So the very act of remembering, or narrativizing creates meaning. So, truth or objectivity is pragmatically defined as representativeness for the subject. Yet, even that simple definition is not without problematic aspects. Often the key informants used in oral histories may be outliers or marginals in their own settings. And one must ask "Representative of what?" For example, much is made of Aunt Arie in Wigginton's (1985) Foxfire series, even to the point of a separate text centered on her (Page and Wigginton, 1983). Of interest here is whether Aunt Arie was chosen because she is a verbal exemplar, or rather a verbal person chosen as representative because she is verbal and outgoing. Secondly, truth can be fixed on whether the subject, once selected, approves of the interview content and the way it has been represented (on tape, in text) by the interviewer. This recursive data analysis is sometimes called member checking (Bogdan & Biklen, 1983) or reflexive data analysis (Ruby, 1982).

From another perspective, White (1978) suggests that even written histories must be subjected to the same critique of narrativizing and

fiction making:

There has always been a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are - verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found, and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences (p. 42).

and "...histories gain part of their explanatory effect by their success in making stories out of mere chronicles" (p. 46). Events or facts are made into stories, then further emplotted by the suppression of certain facts and the highlighting of others. For the historian, and more specifically, for the oral historian, the practice of importance and interestingness are crucial. The signification of events by manipulating importance and interest for story fodder is virtually required. And while these constructs are highly idiosyncratic, they remain critical to the vitality of the eventual product.

But it is also important to remember that during the construction of reality, the researchers' biases operate heavily. White (1978) suggests that the same set of events can serve as components of a story that is either tragic or comic, depending on the writers' choice of plot structure chosen to make the isolated facts into a comprehensible story. Further, he suggests that part of the decision making that a writer of the past undergoes is a consideration of audience and that audience's reaction to and approval of the eventual product of the historian. Clearly, these are framing and meaning making that go beyond the reported events.

More politically, Cohen (1986) suggests that historical analysis, and the resulting stories in history (and from our stance, oral history) are necessarily embedded in the political frames owned by the writer. The

morals found in the data that become the "teachings" of the story are those that support the writers' biases. Said (1983) argues that the politics are even more complex. While writers engage in myth making and the teaching of morals, Said suggests that there is, in addition, a constraining attitude of noninterference in every day life, which, he argues, is a commodity regularly exchanged as a product of academia. Narrow technical language and self-purifying communities, or the underbelly of Kuhn's (1973) scientific paradigms, contribute to this subterfuge. Said suggests that the purpose is to:

...preserve and, if possible, conceal the hierarchy of powers that occupy the center, define the social terrain, and fix the limits of use for functions, fields, and marginality (p. 155).

For the purposes of oral history in classrooms, it is important to remember that the narrativizing of a life is subjective, perhaps politically driven, and at the least idiosyncratic. Further, if Said's arguments regarding the noninterference of academia in everyday life are taken seriously, then bringing real lives into academia and sending students out to those lives from academia, may lead us to some real conflicts of mission. We suspect that these potential conflicts would play out in elementary grades and graduate seminars to equivalent degrees.

Oral Histories as Teaching and Research Contexts

Social theorists, curriculum theorists, and socialist curriculum theorists have been critiquing into literacy lately. Briefly, three camps of critics have emerged. Critical social theorists maintain that educational opportunity or commodities, such as teacher behaviors, grouping practices, and especially financial support, are distributed along economic and sometimes ethnic lines. This unequal distribution produces patterned

illiteracy (Lankshear, 1987) and is certainly supported by descriptions of teacher behavior (Allington, 1983; Bozsik, 1982; Bloome, 1981). Feminist critical theorists maintain that patriarchal social and political structures have excluded female realities, histories, and ways of knowing from the acts of scholarship. And finally, child advocates suggest that adult evaluations of child performance vis-a-vis adult models of reality may fail to recognize the complexities and validities of children's constructions of reality.

What it is that these three approaches share is that each is grounded in an openly ideological stance. Each is a philosophical critique of the field in which the critique is embedded. Recently, reading and language arts instruction have become host contexts for this social and educational critique. Writers such as Giroux (1988) and McLaren (1986) have allowed us a reflexive view into our practices of teaching literacy. While these self-analytic re-views are often disquieting and sometimes frustrating, their value may reside in their ability to evoke our emotional responses. With considerable affect and no little amount of defensiveness, we ask ourself hard questions. Are we inventing learning with our students (children and adults)? Do we promote generative learning activities, where students are empowered by owning the content and structure of their daily learning? Or are we simply reproducing extant culture, automatically and uncritically? The critical theorists in literacy hope for invention and generativity, but often lament that we simply and thoughtlessly reproduce in our reading groups the social stratification present in the larger culture, inside and outside the school.

We suggest that by embedding literacy in real contexts, controlled by students, we are more likely to see them engage in generative, self-

initiated learning. But the bottom line remains the teachers' stance. Oral history can be student empowering if teachers allow for it. Oral history can also be an enjoyable teacher controlled unit plan. One is critical pedagogy, the other is not. We hope that by considering some of these theoretical issues that are part of teacher stance in oral history, that teachers and researchers will have some framing for their reflection.

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